

February 17, 2009

Testimony of Eric Hammerling, Executive Director, Connecticut Forest & Park Association

Honorable Appropriations Committee Members, and Members of the Appropriations Subcommittee for Conservation and Development,

My name is Eric Hammerling and I am the Executive Director of the Connecticut Forest & Park Association, Connecticut's first conservation organization established in 1895. CFPA has offered testimony before the Legislature on issues such as sustainable forestry, state parks and forests, trails, and land conservation every year since 1897 and this year is no exception.

As this Committee understands quite well, the DEP is an agency with a historical disconnect between its large important mission and the appropriated funds available to it. A 2008 report by CEQ (ironically one of the agencies proposed to be absorbed within DEP) compared DEP's annual average state funding level of \$105.95 million (from 2003 to 2007) versus an average annual need of \$341 million over the same period. Through some important investments in the Clean Water Fund have been made, for which the Governor and Legislature deserve credit, the Agency continues to have a chronic funding gap.

In our general assessment of this budget proposal, we believe things could have been worse. We appreciate that the funding proposal for the DEP does not include any layoffs of existing staff, retains seasonal positions, and did not force an ERIP (early retirement incentive program) that could decimate key programs and, in fact, reduce the agency's ability to raise revenues through programs like Forestry. Furthermore, we strongly support the concept of the Connecticut Conservation Corps as a way to help the state parks and forests address some long-needed infrastructure issues.

That being said, we are concerned about a few key elements within the Conservation and Development section of the Governor's Budget:

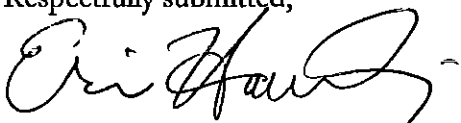
1. The Conservation Fund and the "special funds" which comprise it are proposed to be folded into the General Fund. Although there are some important savings realized within DEP through lower fringe benefit costs, we have a few significant concerns:
 - a. doubling all fees under \$150 will make it difficult for people with restricted incomes to utilize our state parks and forests. The Governor has supported "staycations" and our state lands should be the cornerstone of providing affordable local opportunities for outdoor recreation;
 - b. because the Conservation Fund is now gone, the proposed fee increases won't be targeted to support state parks, forests, and/or the staff that maintain key programs. So, it is possible that the fees will increase and the management of parks and forests as well as the management of our state's hunting and fishing resources will further deteriorate. We would support a

modest fee increase, but a doubling of all fees under \$150 without a direct benefit to the programs managing these resources seems to put the DEP's ability to provide recreational benefits to the public on very shaky ground; and

- c. similarly, we are concerned that the revenues from timber harvests on state lands would not go to the Conservation Fund to help support the DEP Forestry program. A recent Yale Study found that the DEP could increase timber harvests on DEP parks and forests (while maintaining forest health and harvesting sustainably) by approximately three times with a modest increase in staff. This year, timber harvest revenues above \$600,000 were to be targeted to the Conservation Fund to support forestry. Without a Conservation Fund, we would like to see a mechanism by which timber harvest revenues are specifically targeted to support DEP Forestry activities.
2. The Community Investment Act has directly supported \$40 million and likely leveraged another \$80+ million for farmland protection, open space conservation, low income housing assistance, and historic preservation grants in 130 towns over the past 3 years alone. The leverage and partnering attracted by the CIA Fund is one of the reasons why its continuance is so critical at the same time agency budgets are being cut. The CIA is supported by a broad coalition of housing advocates, historic preservationists, conservationists, and farmers who joined forces with the Legislature in a common and visionary goal of protecting and enhancing the unique character of Connecticut. This coalition fought hard to have a dedicated fund that would not be raided in either good times or bad. This coalition also understands that these CIA fund projects not only have direct benefits, but also have multiplier effects through a significant "value chain" that benefits job creation and thoughtful community development statewide. Despite our Budget difficulties, it makes little sense to cut a program that is both self-sustaining and should be particularly effective in times where dollars spent on land protection will need to stretch farther than ever before.
3. Regarding the proposed fate of the Council on Environmental Quality, I'd like to associate our remarks with those of Margaret Miner, Executive Director of Rivers Alliance of CT. Specifically, "CEQ runs a lean, active operation. When have you heard complaints that CEQ sdoesn't answer its phone, or sits on work for months, or passes the buck to another agency? CEQ does its work, does it fast, and does it all for \$170,000 a year. The governor's budget proposes that DEP staff pick up CEQ's mandated tasks. So there will be little if any cost savings. But there will be a large loss in value. It will in fact be impossible for DEP to perform the role of CEQ. **Independence is essential to CEQ's work.** If CEQ is subsumed into DEP, it will become a rehearsed voice supporting the agency. It will have little authority and no credibility."

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony, and for your incredibly important efforts!

Respectfully submitted,



Eric Hammerling, Executive Director